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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000113

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM BO

SUBJECT: EUR/UMB DIRECTOR DISCUSSES OPPOSITION CONGRESS AND SANCTIONS WITH COALITION LEADERS

REF: A. MINSK 003

1B. MINSK 057

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d) .

Summary

11. (C) Ambassador and visiting EUR/UMB Director Boehme recently met with several Belarusian opposition party leaders who expressed their support for holding an early March congress of pro-democracy forces. The opposition leaders generally were in favor of broadening U.S. economic sanctions against the Lukashenko regime and critical of the EU's unfettered trade relations with Belarus. End summary.

Dramatis Personae

12. (C) On January 26, Ambassador arranged for visiting EUR/UMB Office Director Robert Boehme a roundtable discussion with the leading Belarusian opposition political figures: United Civic Party (UCP) Chair Anatoliy Lebedko, Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) Chair Vintsuk Vyachorka, Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC) Deputy Chair Valeriy Ukhlyanov, Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Gramada" (BSDP) Acting Chair Anatoliy Levkovich, former political prisoner Mikhail Marynich, Charter 97 NGO founder Andrey Sannikov, and Irina Kozulina, wife of imprisoned BSDP Chair and former presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin. Although invited, opposition coalition leader and former presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich was unable to attend the meeting.

Second Opposition Congress without Raison d'Etre?

13. (C) When Ambassador inquired as to the opposition coalition's plans for a second congress in late February or early March, Lebedko and Vyachorka supported such a congress as an opportunity to formulate a common message among the coalition's ideologically-disparate parties and attract mass media attention to that message. Calling the opposition to present itself at the congress as a "child of civil society," Ukhlyanov echoed Lebedko's and Vyachorka's logic and asserted that an early March congress would be timely in the wake of the recent energy dispute with Russia (ref A). Ukhlyanov reasoned that the Belarusian people now realize that Lukashenko is not a guarantor of stability. Noting that BSDP had not participated in the opposition coalition and its October 2005 congress, Levkovich agreed with Ukhlyanov that "something is going on" in Belarusian society and observed that the congress could be an opportunity to send the

opposition's message to the nomenklatura, whose support for Lukashenko seems shake n.

BDRA and Sanctions

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¶4. (C) When Boehme referred to the 2006 Belarusian Democracy Reauthorization Act and asked opposition leaders for their views on possible U.S. economic sanctions against Belarus, Marynich and Sannikov responded favorably and argued that such measures would deny the Lukashenko regime much needed cash at a time when the EU will likely suspend GSP tariff privileges for Belarus in the coming months. Marynich and Sannikov speculated that tougher economic sanctions would create additional pressure on Lukashenko to release political prisoners. Lebedko also strongly criticized the EU for allowing Belarus to export more than 50 percent of its exports to EU countries. Lebedko agreed with the use of sanctions, but he cautioned the USG to give the GOB a certain period of time before it proceeded with economic sanctions. Vyachorka did not expressly reject the use of economic measures, but he placed a stronger emphasis on selectively expanding the U.S. visa ban and asset freezes on key GOB officials.

Opposition Looks to U.S. after "Disappointing" PACE Visit

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¶5. (C) Sannikov and others sharply criticized Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) President Rene van der Linden's recent visit to Minsk as an apparent softening of overall EU policy toward the Lukashenko regime (ref B). Marynich added that the visit proved that the U.S. remains the only trustworthy friend of Belarus' pro-democratic

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forces. Similarly, Levkovich described Belarus' position as trapped between two self-interested rival powers, the EU and Russia, and called upon the USG to intercede in Belarus' behalf. Recalling that the U.S. recently raised her husband's politically motivated imprisonment at the United Nations Security Council, Kozulina reiterated her family's gratitude and requested the U.S. to continue its leadership in pressuring the regime to free all Belarusian political prisoners.

Comment

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¶6. (C) Although the purpose of a second congress of pro-democracy forces remains nebulous and both the focus of the congress and the source of its possible funding remain unclear, the political party leaders' apparent consensus on holding a congress is itself important. Agreement on the congress contrasts with the conflicting opinions of UDF members regarding participation (or the boycotting of) last month's local elections. The next major challenge for the political leaders is to secure Milinkevich's participation in the congress. Recent press reports indicate that political party leaders agreed to hold the congress on March 17-18. Milinkevich was not involved in the decision making process. Stewart